

Last Tuesday morning Bob Wallace asked my wife, Kay, to go along with him and Mrs. Wallace to pick strawberries. I agreed to take the morning off and take care of Andrew and Philip. Kay also asked me to hang out the wash to dry. While I was hanging up the diapers Jim Bell, our sexton, leaned out one of the windows of the church and yelled, "Hey, pastor, you look cute." I thought, "Ch, no! And this Sunday I'm preaching about husbands and wives. Now everybody will think I take orders from Kay. Seriously though, the traditional roles of husbands and wives is passing through some revolutionary times. I'm sure many of you can remember when you could not possibly imagine your minister hanging out diapers. In fact there still may be many of us who feel that is beneath the dignity of a minister. After all, we have been told from our childhood up that this is women's work. Until fairly recently both men and women agreed, for the most part, about their respective roles. Certain work was women's work and certain work was men's work. For example, I was reading the editorial page the other night, the editorial by James Kilpatrick. He wrote that back in 1873, Myra Bradwell applied for a license to practice law in Illinois. The Supreme Court was aghast at the very idea. They wrote, "The natural and proper timidity

and delicacy which belongs to the female sex evidently unfits it for many of the occasions of civil life."

In today's world there is a lot of diversity among evangelical Christians as to the role of husbands and wives. Who is the head of the home? Should there be a head of the home? H. Norman Wright, associate professor of Psychology at Biola College and author of Communication: Key to your Marriage, asks us to imagine a Martian coming to our world and landing in our front yard. He steps out of his spaceship and rings the doorbell at your home. Suppose one of your children opens the door and the Martian says, "Take me to your leader." To whom should the child go? To the father? To the mother? To both? Or would the child say, "I am the leader." Who is the head or leader in your home today?

Paul writes the Christians in Colossae, "Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them." Few passages of Scripture have become so emotion laden as these. These verses and the parallel verses in his letter to the Christians in Ephesus have become a battle-ground for men and women within the church.

Nobody can doubt that Paul, writing about A.D. 60, in the context of the first century, clearly taught that the husband is the head of the family. But would he have written the same thing today? Many Christians say that Paul was not laying down a universal principle for all time but only for the historical situation of the first century. Women were not educated. They were treated like children. They were often not even allowed out of their homes. There was a strict segregation of the sexes in the Jewish synagogue. Few women had the opportunity to develop their leadership abilities. So in that particular context Paul is telling the wives to submit to their husbands. In that historical situation the husband must exercise authority or headship in the home or else there would be domestic anarchy.

But does this command still hold true today? Is the husband to be the head of the home today? Is his wife supposed to submit to him in all things as is fitting in the Lord even when she is better educated than he is? Even when she has natural leadership qualities the surpass his? I asked my wife about this last week. I said, "I'm preaching on the passage where Paul tells wives to be submissive to their husbands. What do you think of

that? Do you think there is a lot of opposition to this in the congregation? So many people don't believe that Paul was inspired at this point." Ray quickly responded, "I believe that most Christian women believe that what Paul said is right. Wives should submit to their husbands in all things. We just don't obey it."

But even when we are agreed that what Paul says is universally valid and still binding on us today there is still the problem of application. What does he mean "to submit". I once heard of a couple who were converted to Christ. Before their conversion the wife paid all the bills and kept the check book balanced. She did a tremendous job. Money was always tight for them but she managed to pay the bills. But then they were converted to Christ. Shortly thereafter they came under the teaching that the wife's submission to her husband required a rigid distinction in the roles of the husband and wife. The husband's responsibilities as head of the home included paying the bills. The husband was to earn the money and spend the money. So in a sincere effort to be obedient to the word of the Lord as they understood it they both agreed that the husband would pay the bills. It wasn't long before they were in a terrible financial mess. The

bills weren't being paid. Money was being spent on non-essentials. The husband simply did not have the time, gifts, interest, or inclination for paying the bills. But the wife did. Does Paul's command mean that women should not exercise their gifts of administration when they clearly surpass those of her husband? Does Paul's command mean that only the husband should pay the bills? Does it mean that there is a rigid distinction between men's work and women's work? What about the ideal woman in Proverbs 31, "She considers a field and buys it... She sees that her trading is profitable... she watches over the affairs of her household."

So how does submission work out in everyday life?

Let me do a dangerous thing and give an illustration from my own marriage. Kay and I are quite different temperamentally. I tend to love the theoretical and the abstract. Kay is just the opposite. She's interested in what is practical and down to earth. I'm interested in ideas and she is interested in action. Now in the realm of theology or history I know that my judgment is better informed than hers but in the realm of practical down to earth matters like buying things her judgment is usually the best. For example, last week I was walking by a men's store that was going out of

business. They had shirts on sale for half-price. "That's a pretty good deal", I thought. I bought two shirts and as I drove home I thought, "Kay will really be glad that I bought shirts rather than books." When I got home I proddly displayed the shirts to Kay. Now the first thing my practical wife notices is that the shirts are not my size. So you see, when it comes to the details of everyday living I would be foolish not to listen to Kay's advice. I would say that in our five years of marriage, when it comes to making a decision on something, I will first give my thoughts and then I will listen to her thoughts. And I have to admit that usually I come to the conclusion that her ideas are better and more practical than mine. I would be an absolute fool if I were to ignore her good advice and counsel because God requires that she be submissive.

But some of you may be disturbed at that. You may be saying, "What then does Paul mean? Paul says that wives should submit to their husbands as is fitting in the Lord."

Yes, he does. And I believe that it is the duty of wives to submit to their husbands as long as that does not mean violating God's laws and commands. For example, I don't believe that a woman should obey her husband's command to stay away from public worship. The husband has no right to

command what God forbids or to forbid what God commands. But with that exception I believe that God would have a wife submit even to her husband's foolish decisions. If after careful discussion and even argument the husband and wife are still divided over a decision, I believe it is the wife's responsibility to submit to her husband's decision. I don't see how we can believe in the authority of Paul as an inspired apostle and believe otherwise.

In the five years that Kay and I have been married I can think of only two occasions when the question of submission has even arisen. The question arises only when there is major disagreement over some course of action. Because I think it's important to see how Paul's commands relate to specific experiences I would like to share one of those occasions. When Kay and I got married my study was in the manse. It was on the first floor and connected to the living room. Kay and I disagreed as to where the television should go. We both agreed that we didn't want it in the living room. I wanted it upstairs in one of the many spare rooms. But Kay, for some reason, wanted it in my study. We discussed and argued this for some time. Finally I simply said, "It is not going into the study. How can I study with the t.v. in my study. I'm not going

to argue anymore. It's going upstairs." And with that I lugged it upstairs. As it turned out I believe Kay was proud of me for making an executive decision as the head of the house.

Many decisions, I realise, are far more complex than this. And yet I believe that after a husband and wife have argued and discussed and reasoned about a decision it is the responsibility of the man, as the executive head of the marriage partnership, to make the final decision and the responsibility of the wife to submit.

In another sermon I would like to focus on the husband's responsibility, to love his wife. But I conclude this sermon by asking both husbands and wives, "How are you going to respond to the word of God in our Scripture lesson?" Wives... how do you respond? Do you think Paul was all wet? Or do you believe that Paul was writing by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? If you believe that Paul was speaking the word of God to you today what is God requiring of you in response. When, where and how should you begin as you seek to obey God's word.

And to the men I ask, "In what concrete ways are you expressing your love for your wife? How often do you date your wife? How often do you offer to exchange roles with



her, whatever those roles are, so as to give her a reprieve from her usual daily responsibilities?

"Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them." Let us hear and obey God's word.

AMEN